

Foreign Service Spouse Series

JOAN SEELYE

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Q: This won't go very long, it's just to get a photo of you. Well, we've had quite an adventure getting out here today and here we are, what with one thing and another. I like to do things chronologically. I always like to know where you went to school, where you met your husband, if he knew you were coming into the Foreign Service when you married him, so if you'd like to start there.

SEELYE: Well, I came to Washington after college and worked for CIA, and there on S Street was a little officer's club and they needed hostesses, you had to interview for the job, and I didn't know anyone in town at all, so I thought this would be a nice way to meet people.

Q: Was this during the war?

SEELYE: 1950. And so there at the officer's club, I met my husband and six months later we were married. He happened to live on the same street that I lived on, and he had tried to reach me at the CIA, but they wouldn't give my phone number out, so he lost contact for a month or two, until he saw me walking down the street to the drugstore on Connecticut Avenue, and he caught up with me. He was due to go overseas to be a Kreis Resident Officer in Germany just before Germany became independent. The program was taking the place of the American military, who had been ruling three states in Germany. The British had the top, northern states; (the French had the southern and we had the middle states) We were married in March and went right away to Germany. There were 27 officers and their wives. We ended up in a village called Mosbach, not very far from Heidelberg. I had gotten pregnant there and had the baby in the American hospital in Heidelberg which was a big mistake because the Germans really wanted me to have the baby in Mosbach. We were the only Americans living there, you see. Each one of the officers lived in these little counties; they were the only Americans in these counties. We were there to educate the Germans in preparation for independence. So anyway I had the baby in the American hospital, which was a big mistake because it was my only difficult labor, my only difficult birth. In this American military hospital they never paid any attention to me. So, the baby is born there. We lived in a great big industrialist's house on the hill, overlooking this village, and we did a lot of entertaining. It was part of the job. We had a lot of cultural activities to introduce the people in the village to things like Mendelssohn, or Tchaikovsky, which they'd never been allowed to hear, and certain literature they hadn't been allowed to read during the Nazi regime. So, that was our first assignment and it was a really unique assignment, just living there, by ourselves, with no one but Germans. I had a lot of German friends and I'd be invited to coffee klatches. The coffee was always made out of bark, the bark of wood, and I'd come home feeling quite sick because it was pretty awful. I'm not a coffee drinker anyway-in spite of that we got to know Germans very well. We made a lot of long-term friends there.

Q: Go ahead because it's recording here, and I'll play with it.



SEELYE: And the interesting thing is this was an enormous house with a big bomb shelter and a wine cellar with eight bedrooms in it. Before we left, we found in the basement, behind the wine stocks, huge oil paintings, museum type oil paintings, that obviously this industrialist had stolen, so we turned them over to the American authorities. (So that was our only assignment in Europe, this two year assignment in Germany). But it was a really unique one. And every one of the young officers says that this was the most unique experience they ever had in the Foreign Service. Germany became independent two years later. So, then, a lot of those officers fell in love with Germany, or wanted to serve in Europe, but my husband never did, he wanted to specialize in the Middle East, so after that we were always in the Middle East, and he became a very good Arabist. Our next assignment was Jordan in 1952-1954. Amman was a very tiny little village. It was built on seven hills. Upon arrival we were moved into the only hotel in town before we could find our house. It was just a pretty dreadful experience because I had never lived in the Arab world, and it was pretty backward. Our baby had to sleep in the bathtub of our room. Every time I took her outside I would rush right back in, because you couldn't see anything except Bedouin tents up above the hill, and bedouin everywhere, with their black outfits and their big knives on their belts. That was pretty scary for a girl from Norwich, Connecticut.

But once we found a house to live in, I realized that life was going to be pretty normal there. See, the embassy was a small embassy, it was a relatively new embassy; we had only five officers and their wives. Talcott was the junior officer. We made a lot of Arab friends which was our duty and always our great pleasure (We did so enjoy making local friends wherever we were). Our job was not to associate with Americans, necessarily, or other diplomats. We concentrated a lot on local people. My husband was in the process of learning a little bit of Arabic there. He had been born and brought up in Beirut, as the son of professors at American University, so he had had some exposure to Arabic, and some exposure to the Arab world. I had had none, so this transition was difficult. I didn't know where we were going to live; how could I live in this place, and how could I bring my little baby up here? As soon as we moved into that house, on one of those seven hills, I discovered that was where many Americans, Europeans, and sophisticated Arabs lived. That was the beginning of a nice tour, and again, since the embassy was so small, there was no women's club, so I played a lot of tennis, and went to Jerusalem often. Jerusalem lies on a plateau opposite Jordan with the Dead Sea in between. So, I would go over to Jerusalem quite often, and I loved it. Jordan was a land-locked country at that point, and I felt it, because I had been born and brought up near the ocean. Although of course it's not landlocked; there's a tiny little exposure to the sea in the Gulf of Aqaba. But in those days there were no roads to such places. Now it's a tourist place, Aqaba. So Jordan does have some access to the sea, small as it is.

Let me see what else. In Amman, I had a second child, who we named Ammanda, which actually means, "In Amman" in Turkish. And we left the two "m's" in her name, so people were kind of curious about how we were spelling her name. She was born in an Italian missionary hospital, but it was perfectly adequate, and we were well taken care of by the nuns.



Jordan was a short assignment of about two years, and then from there, woh, then my husband decided he definitely wanted to be an Arabist. Our next assignment was Beirut where we had a big language school. The British had their language school up in the mountains. We had ours in Beirut. So he did a year, having already had some Arabic study there on his own in Amman. Beirut was quite like heaven after coming from Amman. Beirut is a gorgeous place and we had a delightful year there. Of course, eventually, years later my husband went back to Beirut in the 1980's, when our ambassador and economic counselor were assassinated. At the time, my husband was Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs and he was in the Congo on a trip when he was called back by the department to go to Beirut to get the American ex-pats safely out of Beirut. There was a huge American community there. I didn't go with him that time. Even though we only had had one year there the rest of our lives I was always going up to Beirut. It was like going to New York from here. You just had to go. And, as soon as you stepped off the plane from Jeddah or Kuwait or wherever, you felt like a woman again. It was just wonderful. There was the sea and there wasn't anything you couldn't buy there plus great restaurants and friendly people and cultural activities.

After that assignment where Talcott was learning Arabic we were assigned to Kuwait where we spent nearly five years - First off, it was the Vice Consul position ( the post was a consulate, not a consulate general, and also very unique because they only reported to the department. Kuwait was at that time a British Protectorate with no other foreign representatives except the British who had control of all the states in the Gulf. It was a big oil producing country.) (The oil company was run by BP and Gulf Oil with a large American presence there because of oil . Hence the U.S. Consulate. Eventually Talcott was promoted to Consul so we moved into the consulate ,a building on the sea which contained both office and Consul's residence. Our third child, our only son was born in a tiny hospital in the middle of the desert , a hospital associated with the oil company between Kuwait City where I lived and the oil company. But, I had two good midwives, an English midwife and an Indian midwife and a perfectly easy delivery. That was my third child, named for his father, a rather stuffy-sounding name which our son always disliked.



We had a long tour in Kuwait during which we had a lot of VIP visitors because it was at that point, the richest country in the world, per capita. So, it was a wonderful time, simple as the tiny Sheikhdom was, because we got to know the people. We spent a lot of time calling on the Kuwaitis. I have some memories of unusual things that happened there, like the wife of one of the sheiks whose husband had just died, and she had inherited billions of dollars. So she called me to visit saying come and have coffee or tea with me-I need advice on how I should invest two billion dollar. "I'm sorry Sheikha, but this is not the business we're in," I said, and at that point, we weren't really allowed to recommend or get involved in such matters. I went home to tell Talcott what she wanted of me, and I guess he must have discreetly suggested an American bank....It was protocol for the Ruler of Kuwait to have an annual dinner, one month, at the British residence, the following month at the Consulate. It was always a nerve-racking experience because he was a very glum-looking man. He'd sit for an hour before dinner with the women, and then we would all go into the dining room. In those days, it may still be a habit, bedouin people don't talk when they eat. So the dinner would proceed. The ruler would sit next to me, and we wouldn't say a word. I was instructed by my husband, "Don't forget, you don't talk! We were always taught to make conversation-its hard not to. After dinner the Ruler would join the men in the other part of the living room. What a relief for me! Going to his palace for dinner was quite an experience too. Now Kuwait is a skyscraper city but back then it was a mud village behind a wall built to fend off the invading Saudi tribes. So we would go to his little palace for supper, and the long table would have an oil-cloth sheet on it. Actually, I figured out it would be some kind of shower curtain, and we were supposed to eat with our hands; there were no utensils. That was quite a challenge. I would watch the man next to me. So you'd take the rice, roll it into little balls, and pop it into your mouth, and sometimes it would explode on the way in. I never knew whether or not to be glad or sad not to have been offered the sheep's eyeball.

Q: I bet that would happen with couscous.

SEELYE: Well, it's exactly the same, but then we had gravy on top of it, on top of bread. The gravy would run down your arm, I don't even know if there were napkins. It was quite an experience. I would call on other sheikhas.

For instance I had to call on the ruler's brother's new wife. The highest ranking British women and I went to call on this sheikha for tea in the afternoon, and she greeted us in an evening dress-very formal ball dress with a bib of diamonds and emerald which covered her chest. Actually, the dress was very *dij 1/2*colletage, the jewels enormous with earrings so heavy she had to keep taking them off, and putting them back on. She was covered with thousands of dollars, and the poor thing ( we had to laugh quietly) because she was dressed like this at four in the afternoon. But she was a charming woman anyway.



And the other thing that I mentioned, Kuwait was a village, but as we were leaving, they were planning to make it into a great city. I'm told that now it is a big city, but it's not an attractive city. I've never been back. All of those little states in the Gulf profited from the mistakes that Kuwait made in rebuilding. One of the sheikhs in charge of developing the city said to me- they all spoke English very well by the way - "Tell me, what kinds of trees should we plant on the new boulevards?" So, I went to see the plans of the new city. This was going to be the main street, and" we ordered all of these trees from France," and I said, "That's so disappointing. This is the main boulevard? It ought to be a boulevard of palm trees?" By then we'd been there nearly five years so were finally transferred, never seeing how the new city grew, but yes those palm trees were planted.

After something like twelve years of being abroad, we finally went home to the U.S. with three children who'd never really lived in Washington. I had only worked for the CIA for six months, so I certainly didn't know anything about the suburbs. So, I went back home with the three children, and we settled in Chevy Chase. Thank goodness I had a lot of neighbors. I was always asking the neighbors where to get milk, how to do this, and how to do that, etc. It was like a foreign country to me because we had been abroad so many years. We figured it all out, and enjoyed it, but never as much as we enjoyed living overseas.....After a four years in the States we were assigned to Saudi Arabia, an important post- compound was huge; most of the embassy lived on the compound, but the embassy personnel was expanding so some had to live off the compound. The compound had tennis courts- it even had a golf course which was written up in Time magazine, a story about the famous golf courses of the world. It had greens that were made of tar. I don't know how golfers ever came home with clean shoes. It was an interesting post, a challenging post because women couldn't drive, but my husband had a driver, and unlike today, a wife could use her husband's driver. It's against the rules now

Q: In the State Department? Not in Saudi Arabia?

SEELYE: I was allowed to use my husband's driver, but today in Saudi Arabia or in any other country, a Foreign Service officer's wife would not be allowed to use her husband's driver, a State Department rule

Q: But can they drive now?

SEELYE: No, women cannot drive yet in Saudi Arabia

Q: So, what are they supposed to do?



SEELYE: Well, when we found out there was not even a bus into town- the embassy compound was way outside of town, my husband installed a bus service for the women. But I was lucky and didn't have to take that. I was able to use Talcott's driver when he was in the office. I love exploring, I just love exploring these places. I love camels. One of the joys of living in Jordan was I would open up the gate, and there would be a vendor on his camel, I loved it. I loved it. There were plenty of camels in Saudi Arabia, obviously. We had an interesting personnel problem there, so challenging that the State Department gave it as a problem to their deputy chiefs of mission who were going out to new posts. What would you do with a problem like this? The problem was that we had a CIA station chief whose wife was letting her house be used for assignations with the British ambassador and his Swiss mistress.. And it was just awful; terrible, terrible, terrible. We wanted to have them recalled but we had a brand new ambassador arrive who had never been an ambassador before. The CIA agent was very senior. This particular ambassador felt he couldn't get rid of this CIA man and his really belligerent wife. So they stayed and caused nothing but problems, and naturally I had to handle most of it as the wife of the DCM, and it was very, very unpleasant. Morale was low anyway because women couldn't drive, and it was very hot, no place to go, and adding to this quite a few maladjusted females all serving at Embassy Jeddah.

Q: What did you study in school? Did you feel qualified to take on a situation like that?

SEELYE: Yes. I took on the situation with the wife, you mean? Yes, I felt qualified to handle the situation but the ambassador and wife wouldn't back us because they were afraid. When we left, they learned more and more about this couple and eventually the couple was recalled. But I had to live through it. We recommended over and over again to the ambassador and his wife that the couple had to leave; morale was low enough without this additional problem.

As I said, I like to explore these cities. I feel as if I got my PhD in Arab studies , thanks to the State Department, as I spent a good slice of my life in the Arab world. So nothing came as a surprise- I spent a lot of time exploring the back alleys of Jeddah. One time, I was out, unfortunately at noontime, I knew I should have been in and not on the street because it was prayer time. I was out on the street and couldn't get back to the car in time when along came a religious policeman who had a baton, and he hit me across the leg with it. I was properly dressed, with long sleeves, and the dress came below my kneeproperly dressed in those days. Now you have to be fully covered. But he hit me. I decided that I knew the rules, yet I still broke that rule, so I recommended to my husband not to make a complaint to the foreign ministry, because I had been wrong.

Q: So, he didn't? Why?



SEELYE: Why make a problem when it was I who was wrong- and he didn't cause my later knee problem. And of course, there were no hospitals there, by the way. Now there are great big American hospitals in the kingdom. I'm glad we served there because it was already enormously rich, and it wasn't the country it is today. In a way, it was a better country. They had this king, King Faisal, who was a very enlightened man and had spent a lot of time in the United States as a young man, preparing Saudi Arabia for entering the U.N. So, he knew quite a bit about America. I had met him a couple of times by chance.

One time there was a big, royal wedding up in the mountains in Taif. All of the various embassy wives were invited to attend. I was invited because our ambassador's wife was away and to bring along four or five other Americans, and my mother-in-law happened to be visiting at the time so I took her along with the other wives. When we arrived in Taif by plane we were put up in a guest house. That evening the reception took place in a huge garden with hundreds of female guests. The king was the only male in attendance at this wedding of one of his daughters. He was sitting on a little stage up at the far end along with his wife, Queen Iffat, and he spotted me and said to all, "Make way for the women of the American embassy." Well, no one moved.

Q: The waters did not part.

SEELYE: So he got off the stage, came down, the crowd finally parted to let him through, and reaching me he didn't shake my hand, because men don't, but he told me to please follow him up to the front. It was a real treat to be led up to the front by no other than the king! At that point my mother-in-law's whose Turkish was absolutely perfect (she was a great linguist) must have known about this awful earthquake that had just taken place in Turkey. Queen Iffat had spent her life in Turkey, although she was a member of the royal family, the Saudi royal family, she was brought up in Turkey. So, the Queen came down from her seat, and sat on the stairs with my mother-in-law and they cried and cried and cried together about the earthquake in Turkey. It was quite an experience to be treated that way by royalty, no less. And if our ambassador's wife had been there the King wouldn't have sent for us and my mother-in-law would not have been invited.. I happened to have met him several times just by chance, so it was quite an unusual experience.

We did have a bomb set off in our compound during the '67 war. We had a wonderful Palestinian gardener in our compound. Trees don't grow there naturally. With the help of this gardener we had quite a nice garden. Unfortunately, he was forced to put a bomb in with a fern he planted. He did it in a way so no one was hurt, but he was hauled off to jail, and we never heard from him again. He was probably killed, and tortured to death leaving behind a family.



Then we had a lot of entertaining. We had an American women's club there, and I was very active with that. I also did a lot of entertaining with senior Saudi officials' wives. Often, they were just one generation from the tent. One day, two of them were driven up to my house and started parking right in front of the house. The car was driven right up to the front door between two hedges. This was a big Mercedes, and when I opened the door, there they were! The car was scratched because it wasn't a driveway; it was a walkway. As the male help couldn't be anywhere in the room I had to serve them, and I served them angel food cake. They discovered by taking their forks, that if you hit angel food cake it bounces back up. So they hit it and hit it. (Laughter) They were having fun!

Q: Did they finally eat it?

SEELYE: Yes, they did. (Laughter) By the end the poor cake was pretty flat, but they finally ate it. Isn't that funny? Things like that amused me.

Q: Of course.

SEELYE: They finally left, and went up to the ambassador's residence to call on her. She called and asked where they were. They were having too much fun with my angel food cake. And another time, we had an awful lot of VIPs, a lot of visitors from America, including all seven of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee members and their wives. The ambassador and his wife were both away at the time.

Q: Was there enough room in the residence to take care of them?

SEELYE: No. Actually, the Saudis were in the business of changing their capital up to Riyadh, so the King spent most of his time in Riyadh. So, the Foreign Affairs Committee landed there. I was also flown up in one of those cargo planes, the C-131s, an enormous cargo plane that carry tanks; it was an amazing experience. It was totally empty, just me and the two pilots. When you asked for the ladies' room, you sort of had to hug the side of the wall. Behind some curtain was a little toilet room and that was it in the way of modern conveniences in this work-horse of a plane.. So, that was how I got up there. I took the ladies to visit Queen Iffat while Talcott was dealing with the senators and the king. And that was pleasant because the women were very nice; they were lovely people. It went off quite well. Not all Congressional Delegation visits, as you might know, do, unfortunately.

Q: Try having Ted Kennedy!



SEELYE: I've heard. So, that went very well. As I said here, Saudi Arabia was an experience, that's all there was to it. And then next, we went home for a couple of years, and then we went to Tunisia, which was Talcott's first ambassadorial assignment. Tunisia is absolutely gorgeous. It's the land of the lotus eaters.

Q: When were you there?

SEELYE: We were in Tunisia from 1972 to 1975; it is the land of the lotus eater, and you just don't ever want to leave. The lotus eater, Odysseus, never wanted to go back to Penelope, and I never wanted to leave Tunisia. It was beautiful. We had an aid mission there. I was living in Carthage, and I absolutely loved Carthage. We eventually moved from Carthage to the most gorgeous new residence that Uncle Sam has, and that's why I spent a lot of time with the foreign buildings operation of the department when I was here before leaving making sure the design was correct. The design was a little bit off and they listened to me, thank goodness. I would come over here to the Foreign Service Institute before going out there; I saw the designs, and I knew that there were big errors in what could have been a perfectly gorgeous place.

Q: Was it traffic patterns?

SEELYE: I got my way. Well, they had designed a great big marble atrium, and as you walked in the door there was a little hall and beyond that was a huge atrium overlooking the sea. The sea was right below us, and it was magnificent. They were going to close off the atrium so it wasn't going to be usable. I said this has to be used. It can't just be closed off by glass everywhere. You have to be able to walk into it. So I was able to fix that. Then the dining room was going to be on the first floor down some very narrow little stairs. It was very unattractive but I spotted an unused empty space over in a corner near the narrow stairs in the plan. So, we widened the staircase and had this beautiful staircase that went down and attracted people to go down there for dinner. Otherwise, who wants to go down narrow, steep stairs especially in high heels? So we added a big landing with a lovely Tunisian window, and then you went down another little flight of stairs to a beautiful dining room. That was quite the experience to help design that residence, a design which has been copied for other new residences.

Q: At least they listened to you.

SEELYE: Yes. You know, they did everything they could. The architects took me to dinner here, they took me to lunch trying to convince me to give up my fight but I did not give in.



Back to Tunisia, we were very, very well greeted there because most American ambassadors were French-speaking, but he was an Arabist, and the press knew that. Talcott gave a little talk at the airport, both in French and Arabic which the press made much of. We first lived in Carthage waiting for the new residence to be finished. There was a big American women's club there which I was honorary president of. I was very impressed with these American women. One of the things we did was to work in an orphanage. These American women started to adopt little kids from the orphanage. Tunisians are very attractive people, physically. Maybe three or four were adopted. Finally, the government said, no more, that the American women were Christians, and these children were Muslims; so it was stopped. And they could not take any more unless the children were deformed or handicapped. You could have a handicapped child. That didn't stop those American women taking handicapped children. It was just incredible.

Q: And they adopted them personally?

SEELYE: Yes, they would take them home. One of the little boys had an intestinal problem, and they knew, checking him out with a local doctor, that it was operable, and so they intended to take care of that problem once they got home to the U.S. They were just lovely people, all of those who did that. We, again, had a lot of visitors; we had Henry and Nancy Kissinger, and they stayed at the palace. I wanted to say to Nancy... well, I don't know how much I can say in these interviews.

Q: You can say anything you want?

SEELYE: Really? Even if it's not flattering?

Q: Absolutely.

SEELYE: Well, that is part of the story. Part of the problems is how to handle VIP Americans coming over and embarrassing you. Well, Nancy and Henry Kissinger arrived. She wasn't particularly friendly, and she said to me how this was the end of their trip, and all of her evening dresses were worn out so she would wear her least formal dress for the dinner. It took me fifteen minutes to go to my home, put on my dress, and come back to the palace for dinner. So, I threw out the fancy dress that I was going to wear and instead, I put on my simplest evening dress. I got to the palaces and there she was wearing the most ornate, fancy evening dress you could wear. I could have kicked myself for listening to her.

Q: She didn't want you to upstage her?



SEELYE: Maybe, but she certainly wasn't very warm. She literally was addicted to Coca Cola and cigarettes. She was a non-stop smoker. I didn't dare talk much to her because she was a bit intimidating. It was a quick visit, we showed them the sights etc. They were well taken care of.

The next big visit was Nelson Rockefeller, and Happy was not at all happy. We met them at the airport along with the Prime Minister, and other Tunisian VIPs at this presidential plane. Most American top officials travel on these presidential planes; there must be a whole fleet of them. The president only uses a new one; the excess older planes were for these people.

So, the Rockefellers arrived. I had on a very old scroll around my neck, something written in old Assyrian-something from ancient Nineveh. Some relatives of ours had been there when it was discovered. He had come home with a lot of these scrolls, so I had one of these scrolls around my neck. The Vice President gets off the plane and he said, "Do you know what you have around your neck, Mrs. Seelye?" And, I said, "Yes, I do." And he said, "Well, look what I have." As he pulled out one of the scrolls from his pocket which he used as a key fob.

Q: Where did he get his?

SEELYE: Oh, well it was from Iraq. Near the end of his life, he was buying up antiquities, ancient things in places like Damascus and Iraq, and having them copied and making a business out of it. So, he had his scroll, and I had mine. We went into the cars that we were assigned, and he was in the Prime Minister's car, and I got into the car that I was assigned. Happy was assigned to my car too but she said to her husband, "I don't want to sit with Mrs. Seelye. I want to sit with you." And he said, "No, Darling, you have to be with Mrs. Seelye. It's protocol." So, there she was. She was like a little girl. And that night, actually the Tunisian women were impressed with her, because she was a rich woman, with no jewelry on, and just a simple dress. They commented, they noticed, and as Arab women like to dress up they were impressed that she wasn't showing off all of her jewels. The occasion for the visit was a celebration of Habib Bourguiba's 25th year as president so people had come from all over the world for this event. There was a huge tea party, and I would try to introduce Happy to various people, but she had no interest in meeting anyone, just talking to her bodyguards. That didn't bother me too much. What could I do about that?

Q: But did they need a translator?



SEELYE: The Tunisians? They didn't speak much English in Tunisia. Most Arabs speak a bit of English, but not in North Africa so much. So, I didn't have to do much work, but that night, the President's wife put on a big dinner party just for the women, especially for Happy Rockefeller. At the last minute I was told that Happy wasn't coming. She had decided to go to a little restaurant with her bodyguards. What an embarrassing thing. It was humiliating! So, all of the other spouses were there with their president's wives, and I'm there, the only person representing America.

Q: And there wasn't anybody to take her place?

SEELYE: No.

Q: Did the press pick up on that?

SEELYE: They did. And of course, there was no way to hide the fact that she was at a little restaurant with her bodyguards. She was not at all impressive. So, how do you handle problems like that? And that was way after her illness; she was just gloomy, for someone named Happy. She didn't know how to relate to foreigners. It was not as if she was exhausted. So, I apologized; I guess I probably said she had a headache.

Q: It was in Morocco, there was fatigue. There were more fatigued women in Morocco then there were on the census?

SEELYE: So, let's see, oh, this is the first place where we had marines guarding the house. The marines' duty was to take care of the chancery, not the residence, but my husband's life had been threatened. So, we had a marine on duty in the house. And I have to tell you that put the kibosh on my kids having any fun. They were roughly the same age as our older children. They couldn't go downstairs and get cookies because there were the Marines sitting right there guarding the entrance!

Q: What year was that?



SEELYE: This was 1972 to 1975. There was an interesting combination of women's club and doing other things, and of course, I explored the souk, I'm an explorer all by myself. I also learned to belly dance at this institute for performing arts- the Tunisian Institute. That was fun. I cried when I had to leave Tunisia. It was such a beautiful country. And then we came home, and that's when Talcott was sent out to Beirut when Beirut was really falling apart. They were in the middle of a civil war, and we had to get all the Americans out. They had killed the ambassador and we had closed the embassy. They sent him out and I stayed here.

He went out to Beirut as Presidential Envoy under Ford. We were closing the embassy; he stayed there for maybe two months, and he had to work with the PLO against Henry Kissinger's instructions because the PLO was running Beirut. And there was no way he could get Americans out of the city to the Sixth Fleet, who came as close as they could to the beach, without the help of PLO. They would have been firing on them. So, Talcott was successful in doing that and he had to deal with the PLO. I mean, Henry Kissinger, imagine saying you cannot deal with them when American lives were at stake

At that point it was forbidden by the State Department for an American official to speak to them. Well, Talcott couldn't have gotten anyone out of Beirut onto the beaches if he hadn't. So, he went ahead and did it.

Q: Were there any repercussions?

SEELYE: No, there weren't. But there were later on in Syria. When Talcott met the PLO representative in Syria, Talcott was a very polite person and he shook hands with this person who turned out to be the PLO representative. It was a set-up, and the press was there and they took pictures, and Talcott was given the devil for that. He didn't know who the man was and was just being polite.



So then, after we were in Washington this time, for about two years, we went to Syria which was our last post. And this is 1978-1981. I said that I didn't think I'd ever love any place the way I'd loved Tunisia. Well, I just adored Damascus. It's a fascinating city; it's the oldest continually inhabited city in the world, and I just loved it. I couldn't do enough exploring. Yes, by myself, but I had a driver, and he would take me where I wanted to go, mostly down to the old city, not so much to buy anything, but because that's where the monuments were, and a great mosque was there, where John the Baptist is buried. The street called Straight is in the old city where Paul was converted to Christianity. It's a Muslim city with a good size Christian community, and also, there's a Jewish community there too but most of them have gone either to the States or to Israel.. We had an AID mission here. I and a couple of women wrote a book called Living in Damascus. Those books are really helpful. The other embassies might have done that, but there was nothing like that for Damascus. So, we wrote that book, which showed you a map of the city, and told you where the best doctors were, their telephone numbers, hospitals, and about life in Damascus. I think that was important.

At that point there were a lot of political problems in Damascus politically. Ba'ath party, the ruling party, was fighting the Muslim Brotherhood. There was a lot of shooting in the streets, and we could hear bullets and guns going off anywhere, but it didn't seem to bother me too much. Again, of course, we had a marine in residence. He had a big room with all kind of fancy equipment and radio. He was always in radio contact with Amman which was peaceful at that point; radio contact with Lebanon at that point wouldn't have done any good because Lebanon was in a state of chaos. One day I went down to the souk on a Friday, and I could hear the shooting going on. The driver was nervous but I told him not to mind the shooting, to wait there as I'm going to go to the left, the shooting was going on to the right. I seem to be almost too casual about that kind of thing. We would have demonstrations going by the residence up to the embassy, and we would pull down all of these blinds. I would worry about the help. The marine would always put me upstairs behind iron bars; when we went upstairs the iron bars were closed so we were safely locked up.. But what was going to happen to the staff? I always worried about that. But no mob during my time there broke in, but three or four years later people broke into the residence and the burned most of the downstairs. The marines saved the ambassador's wife. One day the gunnery called me up asking to see me saying, "We have new equipment we'd like to show you." So, he came over to see me, and he said, "Let's go upstairs to the balcony ". The balcony overlooked a beautiful garden. He said, "I've got this very special thing to show you. It's a ladder with which you'll be able to leave this balcony and escape into the garden." Around the whole area, these very old trees had been planted that produced some kind of a big grapefruit, but with a lot of spikes on them. I would have been killed by the spikes if I had tried to climb down that ladder. And not only that, we were on an incline on a hill, so once I got down into the garden, I'd have to jump over the wall to a twenty foot drop below-I'd kill myself. So, I told him that, and he said, "Well, Mrs. Seelye, we'd rather have you stay where you are anyway." And he left. I mean, there was no way I could have gotten out of that house safely.



I had a lot of visitors here too. We had a lot of shuttle diplomacy between Tel Aviv and Damascus with the Arab-Israeli problem, but I won't dwell on that. It never got anywhere, the way peace talks aren't getting anywhere now; they've been going on for years and they aren't getting anywhere. This morning TV announced the peace talks had ended.-no surprise to me. Just three little words: land for peace will do it.

We had Secretary and Mrs. Vance come to visit, and they were lovely people. No embarrassment there. They were nice people, and it was only overnight, but we did have Harry Byrd and his big staff, his whole Senate office. He came over on one of those presidential planes with his blue hair and his poor, pathetic little wife - she was really pathetic - and his secretary whom he was having an affair with. We knew that, and she was an alcoholic to boot. So, the State Department escort officer who liked his drinks too could not have a drink the whole time he was on the plane coming over and going back because the bar was locked because his mistress was a drinker. Anyway, these were weird people. They didn't treat Mrs. Byrd very well. She'd say, "I'd like to go with Mrs. Seelye." And they'd say, "No, you can't go with Mrs. Seelye, you're coming with us." They treated her poorly. She was a very shy, quiet little woman. The reason we know Byrd was sleeping with his secretary is because there were press people who were sleeping in the same hotel downtown and one night, one of the ABC or NBC men watched Harry Byrd leaving his own bedroom, and he followed him down to his mistress' room. So that's how we know. Anyway, we gave a great big dinner for him the next day, and he kept saying to Talcott, "How am I doing? Am I doing all right?" And I kept thinking, "We have this very important senator, and he wants to know if he's doing all right?" I thought that was kind of odd. When we took them to the airport, his wife carried his hair dryer. His hair was very important to him, and she carried the hair blower. I don't know when he expected to use it. It was just lying on the seat between them. He thoughtfully asked us if we would like to come aboard and see what a presidential plane looked like inside. That was nice of him. And there was one big room fitted out like an office which was all very comfortable. I could see them calling it Air Force Two or something.

Another hobby which many foreign service officers take up in that part of the world was digging in ruins of which there are many on the Euphrates, there were great Assyrian ruins that went back thousands of years before Christ, even before history you might say, and many of these digs were run by American archeologists so that was very interesting. Damascus was a fascinating country in spite of the fact that it was unsafe at times. I loved it, as much as much as Tunisia. So, I think I've covered everything so far.

Q: I wanted to ask you, where were your children during all of this time? And how were they educated?



SEELYE: Well, I was thinking back to one child born in Germany, one child born in Jordan, one in Kuwaiour only son, and the last one was here. So, she was sort of unexpected, you might say. But we all went together, all six of us, to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There was a little American school, not an impressive one at all. The oil people were over in Dhahran, but we had Trans World Airlines running Saudi Air, and they were a big outfit there so they really ran the American school. Their idea of running a school was not our idea. So, we would have arguments. They were very much against us. They didn't like us because we had liquor, and they didn't. So, when the new ambassador finally arrived, I asked him to speak to the ladies, to the ladies club, to try to explain what our job there was because the Americans there were very anti-Embassy and anti our idea of running a school.

We did have that school, it wasn't a good school, but the children all went there. There was nothing else, and they were all kind of young except that finally our eldest daughter had to go home to school because she had reached the end of that little American school, so she went to boarding school. Then, of course, when we went to Tunisia we had only one child with us. All of the others were in boarding school in America, or college, and we had the great luck of having found a young American woman who was studying to get her PhD in French. She had been studying for years and she was so tired of it. I met her and asked if she would be interested in coming to Tunisia as a companion to the one daughter who would be there without any of her siblings. So, she came, thank goodness. There was a lot of socializing, I was out a lot of time. And this little girl would have been all by herself if it hadn't been for Linda who fell in love with the Arab world, and eventually married an Arab from Abu Dhabi, where she now lives. By the time we were posted to Damascus there were now no children living with us. The children were all away at boarding school or college. There was a little American school there. I'm a great believer in, no matter how bad those American schools are abroad I think when you send your children to school in France for three years, and then you go to Spain, then Germany, they come back all mixed up. As bad as these American schools were, I just thought they were better. Anyway, I had no choice in a place like Saudi Arabia. And actually, in Tunisia I could have sent Kate to a private French school but it wasn't much better than our own little school, so I didn't.



So, for our last assignment, all of them were here in the States at school. Life abroad was a great experience for all of them, they thoroughly enjoyed it. They just did. My eldest daughter might have benefited a little bit more if she'd been in one school all of her life but she still loves talking about her experiences. As for the others, the last child is now an Arabist herself, and she's a very impressive girl. She's the Vice President of the Middle East Institute and has just come home after living nine years in the Middle East, and working, broadcasting for NPR. She's the one who was really hit by the Arab bug. My son's very interested too; and my second daughter took her children out to Cairo to work in an orphanage recently. They happen to live in Greenwich, which is a too-rich-for-your-blood-place to live, and she wanted to get these girls out to see the Arab world, and to show them how the other half lives. So, she took them out to Cairo, where they stayed in a Four Seasons hotel, which was a mistake. And then everyday they'd go to work in this orphanage. It didn't work; it was just too extreme an example of poverty in the Middle East.

Q: How old were the girls?

SEELYE: They were 15 and 16 and had no interest at all in working at that orphanage. So it was my daughter who went everyday to the orphanage, while they stayed at the Four Seasons hotel and had their toe nails painted. Exactly what they would have done in Greenwich, Connecticut. That little experiment didn't work very well.

Q: My son is coming next Friday from California with a ten year old and a six year old, and my son-in-law who lives here said, one thing we could do Saturday morning is take them down to the mall, for the March of the Homeless. Because they live in Woodside, and there are no homeless people there, they've probably never seen a homeless person. But, I just, I support some. Yeah, I think you've mentioned something about a march.

SEELYE: Anyway, she tries very hard to introduce these children to the Arab world, because you see how much we all loved it.



My husband comes from a family who went to the Middle East in 1858, and there has been a Seelye born in the Middle East every generation since. There's just been no break, and one of my daughters is doing a documentary about that family. Actually, they weren't Seelyes, they were my mother-in-law's side. I think it's genetics; it's in the blood. If you've lived in that part of the world for that many generations it has to have some sort of effect on you. So, it's left a real effect, and it's very hurtful for us to see what's going on now in that part of the world. And this daughter who lives in Greenwich didn't take her children this time, but she goes out to Beirut to work in a Palestinian refugee camp. Again, she'll stay in a suite in the Four Seasons. She's very well off, and she'll arrive in some sort of French creation. Then in the morning, she'll have some chinos and her husband's long shirt on and she'll have her hair wrapped up in some cloth, and she'll go off into these camps to try to find young girls she can support and help send through college. So, that's how that has affected our family. She also has a guilt complex from being well-to-do. She's a New Englander as we all are where guilt complexes are common.

Q: One must have one.

SEELYE: It's a combination. Of course, she couldn't take the girls; there are some places where her husband will say no. He wouldn't let her take them to Beirut into this camp. But anyway, I just appreciated my life a lot, a lot. As I said, I got a free education; I really did, I made the most of it. There are some Americans I noticed who, as I got older, embassy people I'm talking about, who simply didn't get around. They didn't.

Q: Tell me about it. I thought it was terrible.

SEELYE: Oh, so you noticed it too! They'd never even wanted to travel around the country, let alone meet anybody.

Q: Our last post was Trinidad. First of all, everybody was working; every wife was working. I was the CLO, I at least had some contact. I would set up things so they could go to cultural events; anything we could do to get the embassy people out into the community. I belonged to a Trinidad Women's club; there were no other American women in it. They all stuck together.

SEELYE: Not just sticking together, and not even interested in taking a picnic out in the countryside. They wouldn't even go into the country, much less see the people. I found that just shocking and a great waste of a wonderful opportunity.

End of interview